

August Spies Autobiography (1886)

August Spies wrote this passionate political autobiography in 1866 during his trial for the Haymarket bombing. During a strike in May of that year, the iron molders union in Chicago was involved in a violent clash with the city police and strikebreakers that caused the deaths of four strikers. The next day, a funeral demonstration was held in Haymarket Square. Near the end of the ceremony, someone threw a bomb that killed one policeman. His fellow officers panicked and fired into the crowd, killing several bystanders and a number of their own force. The strike was immediately crushed with a wave of raids on organizers and radical organizations. August Spies was one of eight anarchists who were detained by the police based on scant evidence. He and three others were released on November 11, 1887. Four were placed in jail, where one committed suicide and three remained in prison until 1893. As you read his account, consider the evidence Spies gave for dismissing American freedom as an illusion and its people's loyalty to their government as the result of a terrible trick played on the poor and the ignorant.

"...Barbarians - Savages; illiterate ignorant Anarchists from Central Europe, men who cannot comprehend the spirit of our free American institutions"... of these I am one. My name is August Vincent Theodore Spies (pronounced Spees). I was born within the ruins of the old robbers castle Landeck upon a high mountains peak (Landeckerberg) in Central Germany in 1855. My father was a forester (a government administrator of a forest district); the forest house was a government building and served - only in a different form - the same purposes the old castle had served several centuries before. The noble Knighthood of Highway robbery, the traces of which were still discernible in the remnants of the old castle, had passed away to make room for more genteel and less dangerous forms of plunder and robbery, as carried on in the modern dwelling under the present government. But while the people from old custom designate this and similar old ruins in the vicinity as "old Robber Castles", they speak with great deference of the present government buildings, in which they themselves are daily and hourly fleeced; they would even, I believe, fight for the maintenance of these lawful institutions.

How greatly these "Barbarians" differ from the intelligent American people! Tell the Americans to fight for the maintenance of our commercial robbing pasts and fleecing institutions - tell them to fight for the protection of the lawful enterprises of our Board of Trade men, Merchant princes, Railroad kings and Factory lords - would they do it? Alas, more readily, I fear, than those "Barbarians from Central Europe, who cannot comprehend the spirit of our free American institutions"!

Viewed from a historic standpoint my birthplace is quite an interesting spot. And this is the only excuse I can offer for my selection of the place for said purpose. I admit that I ought not have made the mistake, ought not have been born a foreigner, but little children, particularly unborn children, will make mistakes! However, I find no fault with such wise and intelligent men as Mr. Grinnell and His jury for hanging men who were injudicious in the selection of their birthplaces. Sins of this character deserve severe punishment; "society must protect itself against offenses of this kind."

But speaking of castle Landeck. Follow me there, reader, on a bright and clear day. We make our way up the old tower. Take care, or you will stumble over the debris. That? Oh, that is a piece of an old torture rack, we found it in one of the subterranean walks, together with several pieces of old ugly weapons, once used to maintain order among the victims..., but why do you shudder? The policeman's outfit of to-day is not quite so blunt and barbaric, it is true, but it is as effective and serves the same purpose...So, now take my hand, I'll help you on top of the ruin. Look out for the bats! These winged lovers of darkness have great resemblance with Kings, priests and masters in general: they dwell in the ruins of the 'good old times' and become quite noisy when you disturb them or expose them to the light; adders, too, made this place their favorable habitation in former years and rendered it dangerous for anyone to place his sacrilegious foot upon this feudal monument; we killed them. They were the companions of the bats and owls; their fate has given the latter much uneasiness, and fears were entertained that something terrible would happen - that the ghosts of the old 'noble Knights' and 'noble dames' would come back and avenge the rudeless annihilation of the venerable reptiles, but nothing of the kind has transpired. I need hardly add that the work of renovation was greatly impeded by these venomous creatures, since their extermination we have made remarkable progress...You smile! Oh no, I am not now speaking of those other reptiles you seem to think of.

But here we have reached the top. Great view, is it not! Over there, about 30 minutes walk from here (west) do you see another ruin like this; that is castle Dreieck, and over there, an equal distance (southwest) you see another one, Wildeck. And now look down in the fertile valleys: the beautiful meadows and fields and flourishing villages! Of the latter you can count a dozen, all located around this mount; and do you know that all these villages and others which have been laid waste during the Thirty years war were tributary to the robbers who ruled over them in these three castles? Yes, the people in these villages worked all their lives from early dawn til late at night to fill the vaults of these noble Knights, who in return had the kindness to maintain 'peace and order' for them. Par example: If one of these toiling peasants expressed his dissatisfaction of the existing order of things, if he complained of the heavy and unbearable tasks placed upon him, 'law and order' demanded that he be placed upon one of those racks, you have seen a relic of, to be tortured into obedience and submission. 'Society had to protect itself against this class of criminals'. The noble Knights had their Grinnells, Bonfields and Pinkertons as well as their descendants have them to-day; and while they were less civilized than their descendants, of our time, they got along wonderfully well. To accomplish their beneficent objects, they did not even require the assistance of a Chicago jury...

Many of these peasants were put to an ignominious death. Some of them would persist in their folly that it could not be the object of society nor the intention of providence to have a thousand good people kill themselves in a laborious life for the glory, enrichment and grandeur of a few ungrateful vicious wretches. Such dangerous teachings were a menace to society, and their promulgators were unceremoniously stamped out.

Not more than 200 feet from where we stand there is a perpendicular (chasm) hole of volcanic origin; it is about 8 feet in length and 3 in breadth, its depth has never been ascertained. The saying goes that scores of girls were cast into this terrible abyss by the valiant Knights during their reign of 'peace and good order'. It is said that these benevolent 'respectables' of ancient times, kidnapped the pretty girls of the villages, carried them like birds of prey to their lofty

abodes and then, when they got tired of them, or found "something better", disposed of them in this way...

Oh, I see, you shake your head incredulously! Have you never seen the dumping grounds of the modern Knighthood in our large cities - a similar abyss? No? It is more frightful than the one I have told you about; its name is prostitution...

You don't believe the people would have borne all these outrages - ? My friend, your rebellious spirit carries you away. The 'orderly and good people' suffered these atrocities just as silently as our 'law and order abiding workingmen' bear them to-day. I told you what happens to those who showed resistance!

My words make you sad, make you pessimistic? Let me show you something else. Look through between these two mounts - can you see a tower in the dim distance - yes? At the side of this tower are yet to be seen the ruins of the first chapel built in the realms of the old heathen, but free and liberty loving Germans. It was founded by one of the apostles of St. Boniface in the Eighth Century, his name was Lullus. With this chapel and others that soon followed the poison of oriental servilism, the gospel of mans degradation, resignation,... asceticism was first introduced. The old Cherutker and Katten, who had in mortal combat thrust the Roman Eagle to the ground were less successful in resisting the mind-infecting poison of pestilential Rome; it came flowing in incessantly through the channels of the Christian church. It is true the healthy and robust Germans were not an easy prey to the pessimistic belief of a debauched and dying race - (Rome) they never have been good Christians - but they became sufficiently infected to loose their consciousness and pride of manhood for awhile, to fall into the despairing vagaries of the Orient and as a natural consequence into serfdom. If life had no value, why then aspire to liberty --- Friend, the ruins of yonder chapel is the monument of an epoch that gave birth to such robberburgs as this one we stand upon. The people would have razed these roosts to the ground long before they did if the priest had not stood between them and 'law and order'. The priest is an essential indivisible part of the despot and oppressor; he is the conciliatory link between them and their victims...

These two ruins, once sacred as the pedestals of social order, are prophetic monuments. Man will soon stand upon the ruins of the present order and will say as you say now - "was it possible...?"

But now turn around - along this mountain chain, northeast, there, where the earth dips mistily into the horizon, the periphery of our view: do you see yonder gray spot, it looks like a small cloud? Yes? That's the Wartburg. You have heard of the Wartburg. It was here, where Dr. Martinus Luther lived and worked, an instrument of the revolutionary forces, the revolutionary forces, my friend that gradually had developed in these villages.

It is our custom to attribute great movements to single individuals, as being their merit. This is always wrong and it was so with Luther. The Germanic race could not digest the Byzantinian philosophy, as embodied in the Judaic and Christian teachings. The idea that this world was calculated to be simply a purgatory and our life a martyrdom was repulsive to the common sense of the merry Germans, and what made it still more repulsive to them, was that servitude and despotism were growing from the seed of the new religion and developing, where once had been

the habitation of Liberty; developing at such a rate, that patience ceased to be a virtue. The rebellious spirit of the people, their animosity to the doctrine of self abnegation imposed upon them by the church had been successfully calmed and suppressed by the priests for several centuries. But as the inequities of the 'nobility' and the domestic burdens of the people grew unbearable, this spirit burst out in flames and in Luther found a crystallization point.

From the Wartburg then the mighty wave of the reformation rolled forth. It was the Occident struggling in self preservation against the Orient. The love of liberty which had been lying spellbound in the peoples hearts for generations now flowed out in lucid streams; the magic spell was broken...But the 'nobility', while they wanted liberation from the despotism of the Roman Church, they liked the privileges the latter had given them, the patent to rob the peasants of their labor, too well - they scorned the idea of the Common People aspiring to economic freedom. Was not 'spiritual liberty', a change of certain religious notions, enough for any common man? Luther soon became the tool of these cheating Knaves and wielded his pen in condemnation of the objects contended for by the people. He denounced the true and brave leaders of the people, the fearless Thomas Muenzer and his associates, worse than the Pope had denounced him shortly before.

And when the liberty thirsty people finally took up their scythes and axes and forks and drove the 'noble Knights' from their robbers roosts, it was Luther, who brought about a vast conspiracy of the latter against the people. It is characteristic that now all religious differences were set aside and all petty tyrants combined to subdue the people. Papist or Lutheran - all were instantly united in this crusade against labor. (America at this time presents an analagous spectacle: Republicans and Democrats embrace each other as Nectar and Ambrosia, wherever labor rises for emancipation.)

Of course, the people were conspirators and incendiaries. Hear what Thomas Muenzer said: "Look you, the sediment of the soup of usury, theft and robbery are the Great, the masters; they take all creatures as their property: the fish in the water, the birds in the air and the vegetation of the earth. And then they preach Gods commandment to the poor: "Thou shalt not steal", but this is not for themselves. They bone and scrape the poor farmer and the mechanic until these have nothing left; then, when the latter put their hands on the sacred things, they are hanged. And Doctor Liar says: Amen! The masters do it themselves, that the poor man hates them. The cause of the rebellion they won't abolish, how then can things change to the better. As I say this I am an incendiary - let it be so!"

- No, these words were not spoken in Judge Gary's Court! You make a mistake, reader - the language is not modern, its 400 years old...And the man who used it was in the right. He interpreted the gospel, saying that it did not merely promise blessings in Heaven, but that it also commanded the equality and brotherhood among man on earth. The champions of law and order and Christendom chopped his head off.

The rebels were victorious at first, but against the united Vassals of their oppressors they could not stand. At the foot of this mount they were defeated, down there, where you see that huge rock, surrounded by majestic oak, the battle for freedom was found and, alas, lost. No, it was not lost, it was merely - interceded by a temporary victory of the enemy...

The spirit of the reformation was the "eternal spirit of the chainless mind", and nothing could stay its progress. Gibbets, stakes, tortures and dungeons were of no avail. On the contrary, the blood of the martyrs only intensified the flames of liberty, until it sprang from land to land, kindling everywhere the discontent of the oppressed in its irresistible triumphant course.

These ruins still bear evidence of its tremendous force! The most momentous thing accomplished by this rebellious and lawless spirit, however, was the opening of the new world. The reformation gave birth to the young giant America, it gave England a Cromwell and France a Richelieu. Its fermenting forces drove the Huguenots from France and the Puritans from England. But for the reformation and the persecution of its adherents these early settlers of the Western hemisphere would have remained in France and England as good and law-abiding citizens. As dangerous elements, society had to protect itself against them and they fled over the Atlantic, rather than to suffer martyrdom at home for their 'advanced ideas'.

The reformation, my friend, which started right here, in the country, were 4 centuries later the "Barbarian Anarchists" come from, "who cannot comprehend the spirit of the American institutions" etcbroke down the feudal barriers, which impeded human progress; it asserted in a 30 years war, that laid the continent desolate, that the exercise of free thought and opinion as well as scientific investigation should no longer be suppressed because they conflicted with religious superstition and dogma, generally believed in and sanctified by custom. The "good and law-abiding people" were fanatically opposed to those in favor of that imperative change, and oceans of blood had to be shed in consequence. The ruins you see here wherever you turn your eye bear witness of the terrible war that is not yet ended - the war for human emancipation and freedom, economic, political and religious. Everyone of these ruins is a milestone on the path of social progress. At our feet lies the historic chausee upon which Napoleon's victorious armies, much against the intention of the their grand empereur carried the seed of " Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" to the far East, and thus opened a new perspective to the purblind eyes of the oppressed and downtrodden millions of our race. Aye, even now that seed is bringing forth good fruit. Russian dungeons, gibbets in Siberia bear witness.

Now, friend, before we retire from this retrospective view, look once more into the mirror of the past 1000 years, observe closely the traces that lead from yonder chapel to this castle, from this castle to the Wartburg, from the Wartburg to the battlefield below here and to these ruins, and then follow them to England, France and America, follow them up to this day and then tell me, if you do not see the contours of the future reflected...You do!...

I have dwelled at great length in describing my (barbarian) birthplace, but in so doing I have traversed in a general way over the history of 1000 years. The present status of society is but the result of the struggle of humankind during this and preceding periods - yes, struggle! "You cannot reform society by the sprinkling of rose oil" said Mirabeau, and history proves the correctness of this statement. In no age did the rulers and despoilers of our race relinquish their hold upon the throat of their victims, unless forced to - by logic and argument? No...Blood, the precious sap was ever the price of liberty.

My years of childhood were pleasant. I played and studied. How different from the childhood of

the offsprings of the average workingman in this "glorious, civilized and - according to Grinnell - enlightened country"! The children of the proletariat have no youth; the spring of life has no sunshine, no pleasure, no blossoms, no flowers for them! If there is a discernible object in their existence it is that of serving to make life happy and pleasant for those who tread upon them. In my nationland children must attend school daily from the age of 6 to that of 14; every child in that "Barbarian country" is thus compelled to attend school for 8 years, and cannot therefore be "utilized and made to pay" by either their parents or factory lords. In this enlightened country, the children of the wage-workers do not attend school in the average more than two years; they learn just enough to serve as a piece of organic machinery, and as such they are "let out" to benevolent and Christian employers in their tenderest years. Their vitality which is needed for their own bodily and intellectual development is in such wise tapped from the innocents and turned into gold for our "law and order" loving, respectable citizens. They die from consumption before they attain their maturity, or resort to whiskey thinking thereby to restore their lost vigor; if they escape early destruction, their career is generally terminated in one of those charitable or reformatory institutes, known as the Insane Asylum, the Penitentiary or Poorhouse.

But woe to the wretch who condemns this order of things! He is an "enemy of civilization" and "society must protect itself against such criminals"...There comes the star-spangled Mephisto Bonfield with his noble guards of "Liberty", there comes the saviour of the State, Grinnell, with the visage of a Sicilian brigand, there comes the hireling juror, and there comes the vast hordes of social vultures: Unisono is the anathema! Unisono is the cry - "To the gallows!"

"Society is" saved and " Liberty and order" - of the Policeman's club - triumph! Selah!

I do not intend to say that the condition of the wage-worker in Germany is better than in this country, but I will say that I never saw there such real suffering from want, as I have since seen in this country...And there is more protection for children and women in G. than here.

I was educated for a career in the government service (forest branch). As a child I had private tutors and later visited the Polytechnicum (and "Forest academy"). At the age of seventeen my father died suddenly, leaving a large family in moderate circumstances. As I was the eldest one I did not feel justified in continuing my studies, they were expensive, and concluded to go to America, where I had and have now a number of well-to-do relatives. I arrived in New York in 1872 and upon the advise of my friends learned the Furniture Business. The following year I came to Chicago, where I have resided ever since; though I may add that I have been away from the city occasionally for some time. Once, with the intention of settling in the country, I worked on a farm for a year. But seeing that the small farmers and renters were in a worse plight even than the city wage-workers, and that they were equally dependent, I returned to the city. I have also traveled over the southern states to get acquainted with the country and people, and at another time I joined an exploring expedition through upper Canada, which failed.

When I arrived in this country I knew nothing of socialism, except what I had seen in the newspapers - the "public teachers"(?). And from what I'd read I concluded that the socialists were a lot of ignorant and lazy vagabonds "who wanted to divide up everything". Having come but very little in contact with people who earned their living by honest labor in the old country, I was amazed and was shocked when I became acquainted with the condition of the wage-workers

in the New World.

The factory: the ignominious regulations, the surveillance, the spy system, the servility and lack of manhood among the workers and the arrogant arbitrary behavior of the boss and mamelukes - all this made an impression upon me that I have never been able to divest myself of. At first I could not understand why the workers, among them many old men with bent backs, silently and without a sign of protest bore every insult the caprice of the foreman or boss would heap upon them. I was not then aware of the fact that the opportunity to work was a privilege, a favor, and that it was in the power of those who were in the possession of the factories and instruments of labor to deny or grant this privilege. I did not then understand how difficult it was to find a purchaser for ones labor, I did not know then that there were thousands and thousands of idle human bodies in the market, ready to hire out upon most any conditions, actually begging for employment. I became conscious of this, very soon, however, and I knew then why these people were so servile, why suffered the humiliating dictates and capricious whims of their employers...Personally I had no great difficulty in "getting along". I had so many advantages over my co-workers. I would most likely have succeeded in becoming a "respectable business man" myself, if I had been possessed of that unscrupulous egotism which characterizes the "successful business man", and if my aspirations had been that of the avaricious Hamster (the latter belongs to the family of rats and his "pursuit in life" is to steal and accumulate; in some of their depositories the contents of whole granaries have often been found; their greatest delight seems to be possession, for they steal a great deal more than they can consume; in fact they steal, like most of our respectable citizens, regardless of their capacity of consumption.)

My philosophy has always been that the object of life can only consist in the enjoyment of life; and that the rational application of this principle is true morality . I held that asceticism as taught by the church was a crime against nature.

Now observing that the vast mass of the people were wasting their lives in Drudgery, accompanied with want and misery, it was but natural for me to inquire into the causes (I had up to that time never read a book or even an impartial essay on modern Socialism). Was this self-abnegation, this self-crucifixion of the people voluntary, or was it forced upon them, and if so - by whom?

About this time while looking over my books in search of something, my attention was attracted by this passage from Aristotle: "...When (at some future age) every tool upon command or by predestination will perform its work, as the artworks of Daedalus did, who moved by themselves, or like the three feet of Hephaestos, who went to their sacred work spontaneously, when thus the weaver shuttle will weave by themselves, then we will no longer require masters and slaves." (Philosophy of Aristotle)

Had this time, long ago anticipated by the great thinker, not come? Yes, it had. There were the machines...but master and slave still existed. The question arose in my mind - is their existence still necessary?

Antiporas, a Greek poet, who lived at the time of Cicero , had in a like manner greeted the invention of the watermill (water power) as the emancipator of the male and female slaves. -

"Oh, these Heathens!" - writes Karl Marx after quoting the above. "They knew nothing of "Political Economy" and Christendom! They failed to conceive how nicely the machines could be employed to lengthen the hours of toil and to intensify the burdens of the slaves. They (the heathens) excused the slavery of one on the ground that it would afford the opportunity of human development to another. But to preach the slavery of the masses in order that a few rude and arrogant parvenus might become "eminent spinners", "extensive sausage makers" and "influential shoe black dealers" - to do this they lacked that specific Christian organ."

I think it was in 1875, at the time the "Workingmen's Party of Illinois" was organized, when, upon the invitation of a friend, I visited the first meeting in which a lecture on Socialism was delivered. Viewed from a rhetorical standpoint this lecture, delivered by a young mechanic, was not very impressive, but the substance...I will simply say that this gave me the passeparout to the many interrogation marks which had worried me for a number of years.

I procured every piece of literature I could get on the subject; whether it was adverse or friendly to Socialism made no difference. In the beginning I was a visionary, an enthusiast. I believed as so many righteous people do to-day that the truth only required to be expressed, the argument only to be made to enlist every good man and woman in the good cause, in the cause of humanity. In my youthful enthusiasm I forgot to apply the experience of historical progress to this particular case. But to my great sorrow, I soon became convinced that the great bulk of humanity were automatons incapable of thinking and reasoning, altogether unconscious of themselves, simply tools of custom.

"Then from the sordid is man made,
Usage and custom he doth call his nurse - " (Goethe)

But nothing could discourage me. The study of French, German and English economists and social scientists soon made me view things differently than I had seen them in my first enthusiasm. Buckle's "History of Civilization", Karl Marx' "Kapital" and Morgan's "Ancient History" have probably had the greatest influence over me of any. I now became an attentive observer of the various social phenomena myself. The last ten years have been very favorable for such investigation as I sought. I found my favorite teachers corroborated everywhere...

I think it was in 1877 when I first became a member of the Socialistic Labor Party. The events of that year, the brute force with which the whining and confiding wage-slaves were met on all sides impressed upon me the necessity of like resistance. The latter required organization. Shortly afterwards I joined the "Lehr & Wehr Verein", an armed organization of the workingmen, numbering then about 1500 well drilled members. As soon as our Patricians saw that the canaille was arming for defense - to repel such scandalous attacks in the future as had been made upon them in 1877, - they at once commanded their law agents in Springfield to prohibit workingmen from bearing arms. The command was obeyed...

The workingmen also went into politics, independent politics - I served as a nominal candidate myself several times - , but when the noble patricians and the political augurs saw that they were successful in electing a number of their candidates, a conspiracy was organized to disfranchise them by fraudulent count and like methods. They workingmen thereupon left the ballot with

disgust...

Although I have myself in past years advocated political action, I have never for an instant believed that thereby the social evils could be abolished or even that reforms, benefiting the workingmen, could thus be brought about, - I viewed "political action" simply and solely as a good means of propaganda...Believing as I do that the economic body is the organism of society, the superstructure of all social, political, and moral institutions and views, I cannot but reject the idea that the foundation of society could be changed by alterations of or by a structure that rests upon it and would tumble down the very minute the foundation was touched.

The economic emancipation in my opinion can be achieved through an economic struggle only, not through politics - although the latter may be one of the many forces of organization, necessary in the development of things to bring the final struggle to a focus. Indeed it looks so at the present time.

To enter into this question more thoroughly in a mere autobiography would lead us too far. But if your readers should desire to hear my views upon this subject, I shall gladly furnish you a special contribution...

In the spring of '80 I assumed the Editorship of the daily "Arbeiter Zeitung", weekly "Vorboten" and "Fackel" (Sunday). These publications have caused the politicians and extortionists much uneasiness, and well they might fear an educational agency of such potency!

Exposing for years the "honorable pursuits", the brutalities and usurpations of the police, I feel proud in having thereby gained their hatred, as no second man has in this city...

As an oral agitator among the wage-workers I have been equally active... I was a delegate to the Congress of the Revolutionary Socialists, held in this city in 1881 and also a delegate to the Congress of the International Working Peoples Association, held in Pittsburgh in 1883.

My connection with the meeting on the Haymarket on May 4th 86 did not go beyond that of an invited speaker. I had been invited to address the meeting in German, but no English speakers being present I spoke in English. The meeting had been called by the representatives of a number of Trades Union. Those present were workingmen of all beliefs and views; they were not Anarchists. Nor were the speeches anarchistic, they treated on the Eight Hour question. Anarchism was not even referred to by anyone... But Anarchism was good enough to serve as a scapegoat for Bonfield. This fiend, in order to justify his murderous attack upon that meeting, said "They were Anarchists". - "Anarchists! Oh, Horror!" The stupid mass imagined that "Anarchists" must be something very bad and they joined in the chorus with their enemies and fleecers: "Crucify, Crucify!"

"Tis easy to astonish or appal
The vulgar mass which molds a horde of slaves."

All else pertaining to this matter may be found in my speech before my hangman Gary and his worthy assistants.

In the cause of Humanity and Light

Yours
A. Spies